

The FBI's Role

Leaks Came Against Backdrop Of a Post-Hoover Power Struggle

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The revelation that a senior FBI official was the secret Watergate source known as Deep Throat has rekindled a controversy about the role of the government bureaucracy in bringing down President Richard M. Nixon.

Most accounts of the unraveling of the Watergate conspiracy have focused on the very public efforts of journalists, the special prosecutor and Congress in documenting the abuses of power that led to Nixon's resignation on Aug. 8, 1974. The bureaucratic battles within the administration between Nixon loyalists and opponents have drawn much less attention from historians — for the simple reason that they took place in secret, far from the public gaze.

As the historical record becomes more complete, some Watergate experts are bracing for a new wave of revisionist histories examining the complex, mutually beneficial relationship between reporters chasing the biggest political story in modern American history and their frequently anonymous sources. Was Watergate the result of malfeasance at the highest levels of government, investigative journalists tirelessly chasing a story, or anti-Nixon leakers trying to shape the next day's news?

"As with most historical controversies, the answer is all of the above," said Thomas Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, a nonprofit research agency in Washington that has collected

thousands of Watergate-related documents.

Charles W. Colson, White House special counsel under Nixon, agreed. "Watergate would never have happened if there had only been one ingredient," he said. "There were a lot of contributing factors."

The news that then-Deputy FBI Director W. Mark Felt helped steer Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein toward many of their groundbreaking stories is focusing new attention on the bureaucratic turmoil that followed the death of J. Edgar Hoover, the agency's legendary founder, on May 2, 1972. Some experts say it is impossible to understand the early development of the Watergate scandal without understanding the battle to gain control over a suddenly Hoover-less FBI.



Bureaucratic turmoil followed the death of FBI founder J. Edgar Hoover in May 1972.

"There was a bureaucratic battle going on between Nixon and the FBI," said James Mann, a former Washington Post reporter who pointed to Felt as a likely source for Woodward in a May 1992 article for the Atlantic magazine. "Here was this incredibly powerful agency, quite a bit more powerful than it is now,

which the Nixon administration was trying to take control of."

In his 1979 memoir, "The FBI Pyramid," Felt acknowledged his disappointment about being passed over for the director's post, which went instead to Assistant Attorney General L. Patrick Gray III, a Nixon loyalist. "There were many trained executives in the FBI who could have effectively handled the job of Director," Felt wrote. "My own record

was good and I allowed myself to think that I had an excellent chance."

In Mann's view, FBI opposition to Nixon was all "part of a larger dynamic" that led Felt to break with the secretive FBI culture and hold a series of meetings with Woodward in an underground parking garage. He says it is likely that Felt relied on other FBI operatives to set up the meetings through an elaborate system of conspiratorial signals, including a mark that would appear in Woodward's copy of the New York Times.

"Those crucial first weeks were all about what was happening in the FBI," said Stanley Kutler, author of "The Wars of Watergate," based on White House tapes. "Felt was an old J. Edgar Hoover operative with a profound sense of institutional loyalty. He was disturbed, as were many FBI officials, by the way Nixon was trying to politicize the Bureau."

Other writers minimize the role of FBI insiders in bringing down Nixon through well-timed leaks to investigative reporters, and take a much more traditional view of how the scandal exploded into the open.

"The conspiracy theories aren't true," said Ronald Kessler, author of several books on the FBI. "A crime was committed, and two very low-level reporters started knocking on doors, developing sources and going through a lot of telephone directories. Probably, most of the stories that they did could have been done without the direct help of anyone in the FBI."

Exactly what motivated Felt to take the huge risk of holding secret meetings with a reporter is likely to remain a subject of speculation. "There's no simple answer," said Woodward, who will describe his relationship with Deep Throat in a forthcoming book. "He clearly de-



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After resigning the presidency in August 1974, Richard M. Nixon says goodbye to his staff with a victorious salute outside the White House before boarding a helicopter.

tested the White House and was opposed to the imposition of Gray, a political hack, to run the FBI. . . . That was part of it, but it is not the full explanation."

While Nixon suspected Felt of disloyalty and speculated that he could be a source of news leaks, his top aides dismissed such suspicions as presidential paranoia, Colson said. While Colson had some differences with Felt, he said he regarded him as "a consummate FBI professional" who would never have shared government secrets with reporters.

The White House was much more suspicious of the CIA than the FBI, Colson said. "I never expected that kind of thing from the FBI. Most of the FBI people were friendly to Nixon, and well-disposed to him, because he was a law-and-order conservative."

Some experts see Felt as an ambiguous, morally flawed figure, noting that he was convicted in 1980 of authorizing illegal break-ins, or "black-bag jobs" as they were known in FBI parlance, of people believed to be associated with the Weather Underground, a group the government accused in a string of bombings.

"Black-bag jobs were standard operating procedure for the U.S. government in 1971 and 1972," Blanton said. "What Felt objected to wasn't the black-bag jobs themselves, but White House interference in FBI operations."

Mann agreed. "In the bureaucratic battle between Nixon and the FBI, there were no clear white hats," he said. "Few people wanted the FBI to continue having the kind of independence it enjoyed under Hoover, but they didn't want it to be used for political purposes either."